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Private Collections

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REFERENCES

Benhamou-Huet, Judith. *Global Collectors = Collectionneurs du monde*, Paris : Phébus ; Bordeaux : Cinq Sens, 2008
Guiot, Nathalie. *Collectionneurs : les V.I.P. de l'art contemporain*, Paris : Anabet, 2008, (Document)
Collection agnès b., Zurich : JRP/Ringier, 2008
Collections particulières : 150 commandes privées d'art contemporain en France, Paris : Flammarion, 2008

- 1 As a glamour topic, if ever there was, collectors fascinate and intrigue. Yet all-encompassing approaches to them are rare, questioning, as they do, not the luxury that swaddles these people, but rather what underpins a contemporary art collection, and the role of these art world players. A series of recently published books have all, in differing degrees, attempted to understand this emblematic phenomenon in our culture. Collecting modern and, above all, contemporary art has not only become the collateral of social recognition; it has also turned into an extremely profitable financial investment (even if the current crisis is calling this principle into question). Any portrait of collectors thus wavers between these two approaches. On the one hand, the possibility of defining the personality of the man, woman or even the couple who devote their lives to this passion by outlaying staggering sums of money. A project of this ilk naturally finds an extension in an analysis focusing on the coherence of the choices made or, on the contrary, on the eclecticism which presides over certain collections. The second approach, on the other hand, attempts to question the exact role played by collectors in the development of the contemporary art market. It is this principle which lies at the heart of *Collectionneurs : les V.I.P. de l'art contemporain* by Nathalie Guiot—a slim book sadly devoid of illustrations. Introducing herself as an ingenuous person little versed in contemporary art, the author

(an erstwhile journalist) draws the reader into her trials and tribulations around the world. With, as thread, a desire to understand what motivates art lovers, she offers detailed accounts of her meetings and her visits to major international galleries. Guided by one or two figures impossible to overlook (and often capricious and/or weird), she does the rounds from large international art fairs to dinners and other ceremonies reserved for a handful of *de luxe* VIPs. The main quality of this book is also its principal weakness. By showing up the artificial way in which these circles work, N. Guiot cannot prevent herself from resorting, a bit too readily, to irony and sarcasm, thereby adversely affecting the coherence of her idea. She nevertheless attests in an accurate way to the mores of a small world where there is no place for rationality. She shows, above all, to anyone who might otherwise have doubts about it, how the world of collectors has replaced, for better and above all for worse, critics and museums, when it comes to setting up the hierarchy of the most important artists.

- 2 Judith Benhamou-Huet's *Global Collectors = Collectionneurs du monde* is the fruit of several years of experience and meetings, and is intended to be more neutral. In 478 pages, this journalist specializing in the art market introduces the major collectors (a hundred or so in number) whom she has met over the past few years. Based on an alphabetical listing, each one is entitled to a few pages summing up their itinerary, and above all the main themes of their collections. But there is one regrettable lacuna: though rich in information, the book is short on illustrations giving an overall view of each collection. A single work (perforce arbitrary) per portrait is skimpy. The eclectic nature of the selection nevertheless helps us to grasp the extremely varied approaches adopted. Above all, and in an intelligent way, she mentions many artist-cum-collectors who make at times surprising choices. This book undeniably draws up a *Who's Who* of the world's great collectors, but it would have benefited from being more compact, omitting, for example, collectors with a passion for classical art, who seem somehow out of place in a book devoted essentially to contemporary art.
- 3 *Collections particulières : 150 commandes privées d'art contemporain en France* is probably the most accomplished book in this small selection. Page by page (and there are 316 in all), we discover how the spirit of the great patrons of the classical periods is once again becoming topical in France. Using some twenty examples, this richly and superbly illustrated book shows why certain collectors have suddenly decided to commission works directly from artists rather than merely purchasing an already existing piece. Rounded off by very comprehensive interviews, each approach is analyzed, dissected, and connected with the rest of the collection. By forging special bonds with artists, these collectors are reinventing the relationship between patrons and artists, often endowing it with surprising and quasi-experimental forms. *Collections particulières* echoes these reflections and demonstrates that a commission can assume many different forms. The musical pieces commissioned by Jean-Philippe and Françoise Billarant offer an illustration of this, as does the critical essay published for the occasion and written by Elisabeth Lebovici for Myriam and Jacques Salomon.
- 4 Lastly, and to wind up this selection of recently published books, *Collection agnès b.* plunges the reader into the artistic choices made by a generous woman who has for years been supporting contemporary art. The first part of the book reproduces pieces from her collection (photographs, drawings, paintings, installations, films...) in a phonily random order, thereby creating novel comparisons between highly contemporary works and other more historical ones. The second and probably more interesting part starts with a

lengthy interview between Agnès b. and the critic Hans Ulrich Obrist. In it she conjures up her childhood, her discovery of art, and the reasons which prompted her to start making a collection. She subsequently dissects the mechanism which made her become a film producer, a gallery director, and someone commissioning specific projects, where possible mixing her activities as a fashion designer with a certain form of activism. Agnès b. pulls no punches as she presents herself uncompromisingly as a committed militant of her day and age. The final part of the book, made up of writings and artistic interventions devised for these pages, tries to imagine an exhibition where a critical analysis of the contemporary world would act as the guiding thread.

We invite readers of *Critique d'art* to consult the following titles, in addition to the selection of books discussed in this article:

Chougnnet, Jean-François. *De Mir— à Warhol : la collection Berardo*, Paris : Gallimard, 2008, (Découvertes. Hors série)

De Mir— à Warhol : la collection Berardo à Paris, Paris : Skira Flammarion : Musée du Luxembourg, 2008

Des certitudes, sans doute(s) : une collection privée d'art contemporain, Amiens : Musée de Picardie : Ecole supérieure d'art et de design, 2008

Sculptures africaines dans la collection Durand-Dessert : fragments du Vivant, Milan : 5 Continents, 2008